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## A 'Lady Lawyer's' Life: Bella Maisel Goldin '31, an Early Buffalo Attorney, Turns 100

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# Alumni Profiles



*"When I did open my office finally, the people came in, they thought that I was the secretary or stenographer or something. They didn't expect to find a woman as a lawyer. When they began to talk to me, they realized that I was on a different level."*

## A 'lady lawyer's' life

*Bella Maisel Goldin '31, an early Buffalo attorney, turns 100*



Bella Maisel Goldin as a graduate in 1931.

When Bella Maisel Goldin was at UB Law School, tuition was \$250 a year – a bargain, until you remember that she graduated in 1931, in the depths of the Great Depression. "Bread was 5 cents a loaf, and day-old bread was 3 cents. We ate day-old bread – 2 cents was a lot of money," Goldin says. "People today don't know what a real depression is like."

One of only five women in her graduating class of 54 students, Goldin was a pioneer – one of the first female lawyers in Buffalo. Pretty good for a young woman who came out of Cornell University and decided to shelve her interest in medicine because going to law school was quicker and cheaper.

Goldin, who now lives in Charlotte, N.C., celebrated her 100th birthday on March 14. She has three children, five living grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren – a family she calls "my proudest accomplishment."

But she made her mark in Buffalo legal history by graduating third in her Law School class ("I never found Law School that difficult," she says), passing the bar exam on the first try, and taking cases as a "lady lawyer" on Buffalo's East Side.

"You were supposed to put in six months" as a clerk for a practicing attorney, she says, and so she did, working with a fellow UB Law graduate named George E. Phillis '15. But after she applied for some legal jobs and was offered only legal-secretary positions, she decided to open a practice in partnership with her mentor. Her father, Samuel, owned a building at 913

Broadway (near the Broadway Market), where he had a jewelry store and later a dress shop, and that was where she set up shop under the name Maisel and Phillis.

Not that it always went smoothly. "When I did open my office finally, the people came in, they thought that I was the secretary or stenographer or something," Goldin says. "They didn't expect to find a woman as a lawyer. When they began to talk to me, they realized that I was on a different level."

Word-of-mouth brought her some general-practice cases. "You'd take anything if it came in," Goldin says. "My father would always talk me up if he had a customer in his store. I wound up with accident cases, anything that would come my way."

She tells with delight of the time she was in her father's dress shop when a customer came in. "I was waiting on her," Goldin says, "and she was buying hosiery, and she kept saying, 'You remind me of somebody.' She had come into my office at one time, and I recognized her, but I didn't say anything."

"Oh, I know!" the woman said. "You remind me of that lady lawyer." "Really?" Goldin said. "Was she any good?"

"Oh, she was a smart one, that one," the woman said.

Goldin practiced for "three or four years," she says, and "I guess I did very nicely." What did she like about it? "If I made a buck. That was a lot of success in those days."

Then in 1935 she married her Cornell sweetheart, Robert Goldin, hav-

ing postponed marriage so she could help support her parents and younger sister and brother. He taught high school mathematics in Brooklyn, and "I thought, when I married, the wife should follow the husband," Goldin says. So she moved with him to New York City.

"I was going to be a housewife in New York," she says, "but I became bored, because I had been so busy all the time between my law office and the store downstairs. I knew I had to do something, but you don't open a law office unless you have connections."

She went to the Board of Education, where the interviewer asked, "What's your background?"

"I'm a lawyer," she said.

With a dismissive wave he replied, "We don't need lawyers."

But along the way Goldin had picked up typing and shorthand, and so she worked her way into the teaching ranks in the New York City schools. "I thought I'd teach for maybe a couple of years and go back to law," she says, "but it suited my purpose very well, and so I stayed with the teaching." She ended up teaching at Central Commercial High School in Manhattan (now Norman Thomas High School) for about 35 years, inspiring generations of young women.

"When an airplane would fly by, you would rush to the windows and watch. It was an event," she remembers. "When radios came in, that was something. I've gone through and seen a lot of changes."